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Scottish Bird News

No 89 Sept. 2008

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A Taste of Visible Migration

Barnacle Geese leaving Caerlaverock *David Palmar (photoscot.co.uk)*

It's amazing what you can see if you stand in one place for a couple of hours and wait for migrating birds to come to you! It has to be the right place, at the right time of year and day, and in the right kind of weather, but when it all comes together, visible migration provides some of the best days' birding that Scotland (or anywhere else) can offer. And you can see it anywhere…

What is Visible Migration? Well, as it says on the can, it's the "visible" migration of birds (and butterflies) whose migratory flights can be observed directly. Many birds are nocturnal migrants (warblers, chats, flycatchers, Goldcrests etc) - their journeys begin an hour or so after dusk, and finish before dawn – so much of their migration remains a mystery. Their comings and goings are obvious enough when they arrive on the coast in large "falls", but their migratory flights cannot be seen – only deduced from ringing recoveries. The development of radar meant that for the first time these nocturnal movements could be detected, and the quality of radar "observations" is improving all the time, but for the most part, we can still only guess at the species and numbers making up the "angels" on radar screens.

Fortunately, many species are diurnal migrants, so their migratory flights can be observed by anyone armed with a pair of binoculars. Diurnal migration provides one of the most awe-inspiring spectacles that the world of birds has to offer. Who can fail to notice the comings and goings of geese, and the link that this provides to the passing of the seasons?

In addition there is the challenge of identifying the species, counting their numbers and logging their movements. If you want to hone your all-round birding skills, vismig is a great place to start. Witnessing at first hand how the weather and time of year affect the numbers moving is truly fascinating, and there are always more questions than answers!

"Seawatching" is probably the most familiar form of visible migration watching. Ken Shaw wrote a great article on Seawatching in Scotland in *Birding Scotland*, (Vol. 1, 1998, 99-101) so in this article I'm going to concentrate mainly on land-based species.

Night or day?

Why some species migrate by day and others by night has never been fully understood. For some species the answer is obvious – large soaring birds such as birds of prey, cranes, storks and pelicans require the heat from the sun to create the thermals which assist their passage. Shunning sea-crossings, these species concentrate at migration bottle-necks such as at Falsterbo (south Sweden), Gibraltar and the Bosphorus (Istanbul). Unfortunately, here in Scotland we don't have a large enough source area of raptors to produce such concentrations, but if you visit the Mull of Galloway (Dumfries & Galloway) on a bright day in September or October, you're guaranteed to see Merlins and Sparrowhawks passing through and heading straight out to sea - always an exciting sight.

Skylark migrating *Clive McKay*

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IT

Amongst passerines, it seems that those species which habitually live in flocks tend to be diurnal migrants, whilst those that forage alone tend to be nocturnal migrants. It has been suggested that migrating by day enables flocking birds to quickly locate and join feeding flocks and thence join communal roosts on their journey through unknown territory - like motorists congregating at service stations. It could also be that open country species such as pipits and wagtails have no more to fear from predators on migration than at other times. By contrast woodland warblers migrating over open areas are probably less well adapted to escaping from aerial predators (e.g. Eleanora's Falcons in the Mediterranean!) if there are no bushes to dive into for cover. Perhaps this "forces" them to migrate by night?

Where?

Visible migration is most obvious where natural land features act as a barrier to movement, channelling birds along their edges. There must also be a source area for migrants to fly from – i.e. in the autumn this means a sizeable chunk of land to the north of you. One of the best examples of this in the UK is Spurn Point on the east coast of Yorkshire. Here the narrowing peninsula concentrates south-bound autumn migrants from a large area of east Yorkshire (and in some cases further north) until they are finally forced to pass the waiting "vismig" watchers at the "narrows", a 50m wide strip of land getting narrower every year as the North Sea tears at its flanks. The list of species seen here by the team of watchers is astounding. Adam Hutt, an ex-pat Scot now a Spurn vismig stalwart, recently described the vismig at Spurn as "the ultimate birding experience", praise indeed from someone with a fantastic record of finding rarities. The Mull of Galloway is perhaps the nearest equivalent land form in Scotland, and would surely pay dividends to anyone able to visit on a regular basis. I'm sure it would make a splendid mainland observatory for Scotland. I have only been able to visit the Mull on a few occasions, but was rewarded with Merlins and Sparrowhawks heading out to sea, not to mention passage Osprey and Hen Harrier, and large numbers of Meadow Pipits, Skylarks and Linnets (one count of the latter even getting a mention in BS3!).

Corse Hill, just south of Arbroath. This watch point benefits from the convergence of several habitats along the leading line of the Angus coast. The thin strip of dunes, the green grass of the golf course and the line of pines guarantee a good mix of species. *Clive McKay*

Other good Scottish spots in autumn are (or should be) the east coast of south Sutherland/Easter Ross, the east coast of Angus and Aberdeen, the south coast of Fife and the Mull of Kintyre and Burrow Head in Dumfries & Galloway. Conversely, the best spots in spring are those whose geography channels northward moving birds. Pride of place probably goes to the Lothian coast between North Berwick and Aberlady, and the west coast of Ayrshire leading up to Ayr, where great spring movements of Meadow Pipits and wagtails have been recorded. Other exciting watch points include Out Head on the Eden Estuary in Fife, and Tarbat Ness in Easter Ross.

However, visible migration is not the preserve of coastal sites. It can be equally exciting inland, where glens and hill ranges concentrate migrants along their flanks. The Great Glen south of Inverness ought to be good (great views and nice coffee from the new SNH HQ at Great Glen House!). Strathspey also has its moments, with a spectacular rush of Redwings witnessed by Jef Leestmans in October 2006. The edges of the Ochills, Sidlaws, Moorfoots and Lammermuirs will also concentrate birds.

Goldfinches on the move *Clive McKay*

Where exactly?

Visible migrants have a habit of following "leading lines". These are often linear geographical features – coastlines, edges of hill ground, peninsulas etc. However, at a more local level, most species will also follow their preferred habitat. The best vismig watch points therefore often have a mix of habitats all converging. The boundary between moorland edge and farmland often provides a good combination: Merlins, Lapland Buntings and Snow Buntings will follow the moorland edge, pipits, wagtails and larks will follow the edge of the farmland, and if there is a line of trees then Chaffinches, Bramblings and Crossbills will follow these until "forced" to cross open ground. Bear these features in mind when searching for your own good vismig spot. But as theory can only guide you in the right direction, the only sure proof is to get out into the field at dawn and find out whether your predictions come true!

Up above, or down below?

When searching for your ideal spot there is always a temptation to go uphill towards where you see the birds flying. But, if you do this, then you run the risk of missing birds that are passing below you beneath the horizon. It is generally best to be lower down looking up the sides of a valley, rather than on a ridge or summit.

What time of day?

A lot of birds get their migrations over with in the first two hours after dawn. So by the time most of us are heading out for a day in the great outdoors, the visible migrants have already flown 25-50 km and are settling down in the fields and bushes, fuelling up ready for the next leg of their journey, and giving no clue to their earlier perambulations. Many of our finches, pipits and wagtails migrate in this staged fashion – moving relatively short distances each day, choosing days when the weather is good and the wind is set fair. Thrushes and geese migrate both by day and night. Waders, ducks and gulls migrate mostly by night, but often commence their journeys an hour or so before dusk, and/or continue their flight

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Contributions for the next issue of *SBN* should be submitted not later than 24th October 2008 to:

***SBN* Editor, SOC, The Scottish Birdwatching Resource Centre, Waterston House, Aberlady, East Lothian EH32 0PY.**

Articles can be sent on disc or by e-mail (mail@the-soc.org.uk), although we do still accept typed or handwritten material.

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NEWS & NOTICES

New SOC Members

We welcome the following new members to the Club: **Ayrshire** Mr C Devlin, **Borders** Mr J Fairbrass, **Central Scotland** Mr P Farr, Mr P Roberts, **Clyde** Mr K McCormick, Mr & Mrs J Oates, **Fife** Prof D Heeley, **Grampian** Mr A MacDonald, **Highland** Mr D A Cook & Ms J Owen, Mr M E Hill, **Lothian** Dr A Bacon, Mrs L Calder, Mr & Mrs M Clague, Mrs D ME DuVivier, Ms J Forder, Dr M Kinnison, Mr J McWatt, Mrs M Sneddon, Mr N Wander, **Stewartry** Mr W Carswell, **Tayside** Dr D Parish.

SOC 200 Club

The latest prizewinners are – **May: 1st** £30 Mrs. Betts **2nd** £20 P. Speak **3rd** £10 Mrs. A. Beggs; **June: 1st** £30 B.S.Smith **2nd** £20 R.N.Cinderley **3rd** £10 Dr.K. Halliday; **July: 1st** £30 Dr.E.Renwick **2nd** £20 G.A.Bell **3rd** £10 Dr.W.Morrison.

New members are always welcome. They must be over 18 and SOC members. Please contact – Daphne Peirse-Duncombe, Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose, Roxburghshire TD6 9NH

The photo below shows our latest purchase using the valuable funds created by the 200 Club - a handsome mobile Browser for displaying large prints at Waterston House.

The mobile Browser *Chris Rose*

The Birds of Scotland – art exhibition

In early July, the Donald Watson Gallery at Waterston House hosted an exclusive exhibition of original artwork from the Club's award-winning publication, *The Birds of Scotland*. The show comprised 43 watercolour sketches of (mostly) common bird species by John Busby and 34 intricate scraperboard drawings of rarities by Tommy Daniels. Chris Rose's limited edition Snow Bunting print completed the line-up. By the end of July, all of John's pieces and over half of Tommy's had been sold, translating to over £5000 in sales and around £1500 in commission for the Club.

The artists *Bernie Zonfrillo*

The evening preview of the exhibition was held on Friday 4th July and was well-attended. Guests included Mike Betts and Bernard Zonfrillo from the *BS3* editorial team. The atmosphere quickly became charged as pieces were snapped up and the 'red dots' started to multiply. The pictures, all neutrally framed, were very reasonably priced, ranging from £60 to £120. They were also a very manageable size (around 10x12cm or smaller), which eliminated the '*Where will it go?*' factor. The exhibition has also helped to promote sales of the book itself, which was on display in the gallery throughout the exhibition.

Thanks go to both artists and to Dave Allan for organising such a successful exhibition. A special thanks too to volunteers Keith and Dorothy Macgregor, for taking care of the hospitality arrangements for the Preview.

Wendy Hicks

Award for the SOC

The Zoological Society of London's Silver Medal is awarded "to a Fellow of the Society or any other person for contributions to the understanding and appreciation of zoology, including such activities as public education in natural history, and wildlife conservation." The 2007 Silver Medal was awarded to The SOC for the publication of *The Birds of Scotland*. Ian Andrews accepted the award on behalf of the club from ZSL's President, Sir Patrick Bateson, at a ceremony in London on 17 June 2008. The certificate and medal will be on display at Waterston House in the near future.

Ian Andrews with the Silver Medal

Bird Watching For Beginners Courses

Following the opening of Waterston House in October 2005, we had been keen to offer bird watching walks but were unsure how much interest there would be. We soon found that visitors to the centre were inquiring about guided walks so we gathered the names, addresses and phone numbers of those interested and whether they had binoculars, and decided if we got enough people we would start a "Bird Watching for Beginners" course. Before long we had 20 people to contact and, having two leaders, were in a position to organise a course to two groups. Virtually everyone who had shown interest enrolled for the first course.

Ready to go

The course consisted of four three-hour walks in four different habitats – estuarine, woodland, moorland, fresh water wetlands – taking place every second Sunday with 8-10 people in each group. We felt it was important not to make the groups too large since people were paying (£24 for the course). The walks have raised between three and four thousand pounds for the Club so far.

Interest has continued and we are now currently running at least four courses per year using the same format, which works extremely well, with both new and previous participants enrolling. The courses are run mainly in Spring and Autumn (although some have also run into Winter) and walks are planned at suitable times e.g. dawn chorus, high tide roost counts. We make initial contact by phone to give the dates, times and locations followed up by a letter confirming these details, as well as providing information on what to bring/wear. Maps are provided for difficult-to-find locations. At the beginning of each course we provide a handout on the topography of birds and have a brief discussion on general identification. While the walks have boosted membership and generated sales of optical equipment and books, more importantly the courses have encouraged many newcomers to the world of birds.

Walking to varying sites *Dave Allan*

Dave Allan and Keith Mcgregor
Waterston House

In action at Musselburgh *Dave Allan*

Do you want to help the SOC?

The SOC is your club; its success depends on the contribution from members. This short feature will, over successive issues of *SBN*, highlight some of the ways that you can help. If you wish any further information please contact: Wendy Hicks at Waterston House.

- Gift Aid
- **Remembering the SOC in your Will:** A valuable form of support comes from those kind individuals who have included the SOC in their will. Please consider this and contact your solicitor who will advise you on the best way to give this help.
- Gifting old books
- Attracting/Inviting new members to join
- Getting involved in Surveys
- Assisting with branch activities
- Contributing articles for publications

David Jardine

Visible Migration - continued from Page 2

after dawn until they reach a suitable stop-off. These wildfowl often add variety to a sea-watch, though rarely in large numbers.

Even within a morning watch, different species move at different times: pipits, wagtails, winter thrushes, Wood Pigeons and Starlings are usually most numerous in the first few hours after dawn; finches are slightly later starters and can continue moving throughout the morning; Skylarks are surprisingly late starters, and along with the hirundines, don't usually get going until a few hours after dawn. Raptors of course generally wait for late morning thermals, but Kestrels, Merlins, Honey Buzzard and harriers are more active fliers and can be seen at any time.

Dawn in the Angus Glens *Clive McKay*

Seasonality

Over the years, it's possible to build up a clear picture of the timing of migration of different species. VisMig gets under way in August with hirundines, Tree Pipits and towards the end of the month the first White Wagtails. Grey and White Wagtails peak in early September, with the mass exodus of Meadow Pipits from our uplands taking place in the third week of Sept. Richard Bramhall once counted several thousands in half an hour during a westerly gale at Carnoustie, Norman Elkins recalls a constant stream of Mipits "tsee-tseep"ing their way south over St Andrews and Chris Smout saw thousands in a couple of hours heading out from Elie Ness in Fife across the Forth. Even the humble Meadow Pipit can put on a good show!

Early October is usually marked by the first big invasion of Redwings – best viewed in the foothills, these birds may be heading in any direction from SW to NW. Pied Wagtails also peak in early October, as do most of our finches. In invasion years, Crossbills can be seen moving almost anywhere at this time, but they will also be on the move in July – the only significant July mover. By the end of November the Fieldfares are flooding in, and this is one of my favourite visible migrants. No wind is strong enough to hold them back: they'll use every contour of the land to minimise its effect, but will not be stopped. Athletic flocks of Fieldfares flowing over the late autumn landscape and scything through a bitterly cold north-westerly marks the turn from autumn to winter in my book. Once the migratory "urge" has passed, the Fieldfares will become their normal berry-feeding, approachable selves, and you know that winter is here, and that the vismig season is over for another year, almost...

Pigeon detectives wanted

A final treat and a mystery is still in store. Wood Pigeons migrate SW across Scotland in large numbers in October, yet in November, they can be seen heading back NE in the opposite direction. In 2006 I counted over 50,000 in total over the Angus Glens. On the morning of 22 Nov 2001 David Graham saw an incredible 20,000 Wood Pigeons flying SW inland from the coast at St Abbs (Borders). Were these birds newly arrived from the continent? Large numbers have also been seen at Barry Buddon in Angus, again possibly pointing to a continental origin. However, I'm convinced these are British birds (see account in BS3 for a full explanation). It's nice to know that one of our commonest birds can still present us with a migration mystery, and the sight of Wood Pigeons passing overhead in their thousands in almost total silence (but for the winnowing of their wings) on calm clear days in November is not to be missed. Where ever you are in Scotland, I would welcome any

Wood Pigeons migrating along the southern edge of the Grampians in October 2006. Clive McKay

records of numbers and crucially direction that Wood Pigeons fly over your house from mid-Oct to late November.

Identification

This is the fun bit. The good news is that most visible migrants have familiar contact calls with which we are all familiar. Knowing these is the key to refining your visual ID skills. Also, because the birds are approaching you, you have a chance to attempt an ID first at long distance, and then to check your success as the bird gets closer. If you can't hear the calls, then the best (perhaps the only) way to ID visible migrants is by "jizz", that mysterious term used to explain the unexplainable about bird identification!

The word "jizz" is thought to derive from a 2nd world war term used to identify aircraft - *general impression, size and shape*. In the simplest terms, not only does a Lancaster bomber differ in shape and size from a Spitfire, but these factors also determine the very way that the planes fly: a Lancaster can never turn in a tight circle like a Spitfire. The same applies to birds, and although the shape of a Buzzard is very similar to that of a Golden Eagle, it is still possible to tell them apart at great range by the wider sweeping turns and slow wing beats of the eagle compared to the tighter turns and quicker wing-beats of a buzzard. The same applies to all species. Though superficially similar, a Greenfinch is almost twice as bulky as a Siskin, so the Greenfinch has a heavier flight with shallow, workman-like undulations, whereas the Siskin has a bright and breezy flight, with energetic bouncy undulations.

Each species also has its own "flock jizz". Chaffinches fly in loose groups, hardly a flock, whereas Brambling flocks are much more cohesive. Likewise Twite flocks are more tight-knit than Linnets. But the prize for flock tightness must go to the sparrows. Clearly agoraphobic, both House and Tree Sparrows only brave the open ground if almost touching their flock-mates and calling loudly (a bit like a group of teenagers heading down the high street).

Tree Sparrows in flight *Clive McKay*

You'll never ID all the birds that fly past, but if you miss a few, not to worry, there's always another flock coming over the horizon!

Scottish vismig spectacles

I have already described some of the species on the move in Scotland. When you read this, the first flocks of Pink-footed Geese will be arriving from Iceland – the first sign that winter is on its way. Geese and swans are perhaps our most visible migrants. Pink-feet continue to move throughout the winter from Loch of Strathbeg and Loch Leven, to Aberlady, south to Lancashire and Norfolk, and then back again from the end of January onwards. Alan Leitch and I saw 7,500 returning Pinks heading NE over the Angus glens on 19 March 2006. But some of the routes that Pinks take are poorly documented, and more counts are required, particularly as wind farms sprout up along these routes. Come April, the Pinks' (and Greylags') compass is set squarely NW, and not even the Cairngorms and rain and mist will stop them. It's amazing to see these flocks pass overhead heading up Glen Isla, getting smaller and smaller and disappearing into the corries of Caenlochan looking for a gap in the weather. But my favourite migrating goose is perhaps an unlikely one, the Pale-bellied Brent.

Pale-bellied Brents

Brent Geese are never common in Scotland, though historically they wintered in larger numbers on the west coast prior to the loss of Eel Grass beds in places such as Islay. Most Brents on the west coast are of the Pale-bellied race, and we see them mostly on passage to and from their wintering grounds in Northern Ireland. Nice wee geese, fairly unassuming and not generally a bird to stir the heart of the hardened birder. But, like so many migrants, it is a bird possessed of an iron will to reach its destination when on the move. Park yourself on a western seawatching headland in September, such as Frenchman's Rocks on Islay, and you will surely see Brents passing by – heading for Strangford Loch. If the gales are strong enough and the showers heavy enough to make you cower under your kagoul behind a rock, then you will be hoping to see Sabine's Gulls, Grey Phalaropes and Leach's Petrels - which will be nice. But for me such days have often been most memorable for the sight of flock after flock of Brents approaching from the north-west into the teeth of a howling squall as they try to skirt the worst of the hail; getting closer, count them and finally hear their guttural calls above the almost deafening crash of surf. It would be easy enough for these Brents to pitch in to Islay, have a wash and brush up with all the other geese, and move on when the weather improves. It seems madness for them not to when the wind is so strong that you can hardly walk into it. But these birds have crossed from Canada to Iceland over the Greenland ice cap; now they are close to their winter home, and nothing that the weather can throw at them will stop them. Splendid!

And finally...

If you want to see up to the minute (literally) counts of visible migration at a range of sites across Scotland, the UK and north-west Europe, simply log on to www.trektellen.nl, or sign on to the vismig newsgroup at vismig@yahoogroups.com If you're interested in getting involved in visible migration, drop me a line at the e-mail address below.

Recommended reading:

Alerstam, Thomas. 1982. *Bird Migration.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Clive McKay
clive.mckay@btinternet.com

The Outer Limits – birding in the Western Isles in autumn

Mourning Dove twitch on North Uist in November 2007 *Stephen Duffield*

Stephen Duffield has worked for SNH and RSPB and is well-known in Hebridean wildlife circles. Living in South Uist, he is a Tour Leader with Western Isles Wildlife Tours which offer a wide range of experiences including bird and otter watching and wildflower study.

The distant cackle of Barnacle Geese and honking of Whooper Swans heralds the arrival of distant travellers from Greenland and Iceland on a still, mid-October morning. A high pressure system resulting in clear, blue skies has encouraged birds to leave the more northerly climes and head south. On a good day thousands of geese and swans can pass through the islands in a concentrated period of just a couple of days. It's an exhilarating wildlife spectacle and one of the most memorable experiences of birding in the Western Isles in the autumn. Each month has its highlights and choosing just when to come depends on what you most want to do or see.

You could say that autumn begins in July / August with the southerly movement of waders, although September is really when things begin to hot up. Thousands of Golden Plover from Iceland pause to refuel on the islands before they move on down, through the UK to their wintering grounds. Large flocks containing up to 2,000 birds may congregate on machair sites along the west coast of the Uists and around Ness in Lewis. The vast numbers sometimes attract stray birds from the other side of the pond too with regular sightings of both American Golden Plover and Buff-breasted Sandpiper in recent years. The Uists are probably one of the best places in the UK for the latter species with up to 5 Buff-breasts seen together in South Uist in both 2005 and 2006 with others recorded from North Uist and Lewis too. These dainty, neat sandpipers are a real treat with their finely marked plumage and yellow legs, readily distinguishing them from the much commoner Ruff. Other waders throng the

Juv. American Golden Plover at Ness, Lewis 2006 *Stephen Dutfield*

beaches and bays of the Uists with thousands of birds at favoured locations such as the South Ford, separating Benbecula from South Uist. The air is alive with the sounds of their wings and calls as they lift and fall with the passing of one of the many raptors or the rise of the tide. Diligent searching sometimes reveals more American strays such as Pectoral and White-rumped Sandpipers, whilst regulars from the east feature both Curlew Sandpiper and Little Stint. Commoner species include both Black-tailed and Bar-tailed Godwits as well as Grey Plover, Sanderling, Greenshank (which stay for winter), Ringed Plover, Turnstone and Purple Sandpiper; the latter wintering in nationally important numbers in the Uists. Small transient flood pools are also excellent for attracting more unusual species, and bays along the west coast often hold Grey Phalarope after gales in October – November.

Buff-breasted Sandpiper at Eochar, S. Uist 2006 *John Kemp*

Once you're fed up with combing though the masses of waders, then there are the seabirds: headlands lying on the north-west and west coast of the Uists and Lewis can be excellent for seabird passage during September and early October with good numbers of Storm and Leach's Petrels passing close in-shore in the right conditions. Hundreds of Manx and Sooty Shearwaters pass by and occasionally Sabine's Gull and all four species of skua are seen. Sea-watching requires patience and the will to sit out in some atrocious conditions, but the chance to experience these ocean wanderers up close is worth it. Seeing petrels shear and dance between towering, green waves that thunder along the shore in the teeth of a North Atlantic gale is not only exciting but awe-inspiring. The anticipation and chance that almost anything could fly by is what often keeps one going during the quieter times, whilst the position of the Western Isles, on the north-western fringe of the UK, must place this archipelago among the best locations for sea-watching and picking out that dream bird. Last year the first Fea's Petrel for the islands was seen in August off Labost, Lewis and although perhaps a species that was expected, no one could have predicted what took place a couple of weeks later. On the 8th September 2007, a staggering 7,114 Great Shearwaters were logged between 07:15 and 17:00 heading west past the Butt of Lewis. This phenomenal count occurred in calm conditions after a persistent fog bank had just begun to clear and smashed the previous Scottish day count of 70 by some margin!

It is surprising just what birds do occur in the Western Isles. The islands are not renowned for huge numbers of migrants, but passerines can also be found in abundance on the Uist machair with large, mixed flocks of up to 1,000 Skylarks, Twite and Corn Buntings. They gather during the autumn to feed on the stubble where they are joined by good numbers of Snow Buntings, adding a splash of white to the large, twittering swirling mass of birds. Small numbers of Lapland Buntings also join in the general melee from September till November, creating these super flocks that in turn attract predators such as Merlin, Peregrine Falcon and Hen Harrier. This spectacle lasts throughout the winter, but autumn birding would not be complete for many without searching out some of those elusive LBJs and partaking in a bit of bush-bashing. As more and more islanders are developing gardens around their homes, they have provided welcome shelter to stray passerines, although finding these is often hard work. Regular east coast species such as Garden Warbler, Lesser Whitethroat, Redstart and Pied Flycatcher are quite scarce on the islands and even Chiffchaffs and Blackcaps don't become common until October and November. Even so, the handful of local birders regularly pick up a whole selection of scarce migrants such as Barred Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher and Scarlet Rosefinch in most years. Persistence is the key and does eventually pay off, with recent garden ticks including Red-eyed Vireo and Pine Bunting - it all comes down to coverage.

Lapland Bunting on Berneray, N. Uist 2007 *Stephen Dutfield*

So where would you start in such a huge area with very few birders, yet miles of attractive habitat for migrants? Well the truth is, you could go just about anywhere and be fairly secure in the knowledge that no one will have been there that day or even that week. The Western Isles have received relatively little attention from visiting birders in the autumn and although they'll never rival Shetland for the number of rarities, the potential to find your own is probably better here than in the northern isles. In the last few years an intrepid band of Scottish mainland birders managed to bird their way through a couple of weeks of autumn on the small island of Barra. It's been tough at times but the rewards have been amazing with such goodies as Paddyfield Warbler, Blyth's Reed Warbler, Yellow Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Citrine Wagtail and many, many more. Barra looked like it was the Fair Isle of the west, but with a couple of quiet years the excitement has waned and the high expectation has resulted in a subsequent lull in enthusiasm. Barra is good, and lying at the end of an island chain, birds do filter down from the rest of the isles (as proven by the 2006 Isabelline Shrike) but the rest of the islands are also excellent.

The Mourning Dove *Stephen Duffield*

Isabelline Shrike at Brue, Lewis 2006 *John Kemp*

Some sites stand out as being prime locations for finding more unusual species: in Lewis north Ness is a magical place and in the last few years the whole area has produced some incredible birds; Purple Martin, Least Sandpiper, Baird's Sandpiper, Olive-backed Pipit and Red-rumped Swallow to name a few, but the full potential has surely just been touched upon. Other hot spots in Lewis are: the Barvas – Bragar area which has produced Redhead, Isabelline Shrike and White's Thrush amongst others; Gress to North Tolsta is also an area that stands out and although there is very little coverage, it has still held a long-staying White's Thrush. Harris is more or less neglected, whilst the Uists have quite a few prime areas and many more that would benefit from better coverage: Newton House to Clachan Sands in North Uist has a history of good birds including Hooded Merganser, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Veery, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Killdeer; West Benbecula lochs and machair has produced many unusual species including Upland Sandpiper, Greater Yellowlegs and Buff-bellied Pipit to name a few. In South Uist the most outstanding area is the stretch of gardens, plantations and micro habitats that are found between Druidibeg and Snishival. This area has produced the UK's first (and only) Long-tailed Shrike, 2 Blackpoll Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warbler and Swainsons Thrush, plus a whole host of scarcities.

Least Sandpiper on Butt of Lewis *A. Drake*

The potential is largely unrealised, but to be here when it's all happening is one of the most exciting experiences you can have birding in the UK. You can't fail to have an excellent time whether you're looking for rarities, want to witness huge numbers of waders and wildfowl, or get up close to some superb seabirds. It's the in place to be.

For more information on birding, recent sightings and photos from the Outer Hebrides please visit: www.western-isles-wildlife.co.uk

Stephen Duffield

First and last photos of Britain's other eagle

Yell albino Sea Eagle *H.B. Macpherson (Courtesy of the Hon. Douglas Weir)*

As a footnote to the recent article in ***Scottish Bird News* 88** (June 2008) about the Newtonmore bird photographer Harry Brewster Macpherson (1880-1947) I should like to draw attention to his encounter with the last truly British White-tailed Sea Eagle.

I lived on the Isle of Rum from 1975 to 1985, managing the reintroduction of the White-tailed Sea Eagle to Scotland. Whilst researching a book on the project - entitled ***The Return of the Sea Eagle*** which was published by Cambridge University Press in 1983 but now out of print - I became particularly interested in the history of the species prior to its extinction.

A friend, the late Douglas Weir of Newtonmore, gave me two small photographic prints that had been taken in Shetland by H.B. Macpherson. They showed a lone sea eagle, apparently on a ledge at North Roe on the North Mainland. With Doug's permission I included the photographs in my book and was able to give further background to the sea eagle and its eyrie.

Another good friend, the late Bobby Tulloch from Yell, explained to me that sea eagles bred at the Egg on the West Neaps of the island of Yell, sometimes called the Neaps of Graveland. Indeed there is a rock pillar nearby known as 'Eagle Stack'. According to the Rev. George Low (***A Tour through some of the Islands of Orkney and Shetland*** 1879) the site had been known at least as far back as 1774, and had doubtless remained occupied until 1904. In that year a single egg was stolen from it, eventually finding its way into the collections of the National Museums of Scotland in Edinburgh. It is said that the robber was caught and punished.

In 1910 the eyrie was again robbed of its eggs, by a clergyman named Sorby, from Derby. He or his accomplice, was also caught and punished - or are the 1904 and 1910 incidents being confused? Pat and Ursula Venables (***Birds and Mammals of Shetland*** 1955) recorded that the climbing spikes were still to be seen in the rock, though they do confuse the subsequent dates of this pair with another on Noss/Bressay. Jack Tulloch (***Scot. Nat.*** 1904, p 245) noted that the female of the Yell pair was an 'albino', and it was obviously the same bird which had latterly frequented another site across Yell Sound at North Roe on the North Mainland. It is not uncommon for sea eagles to have several alternative nest sites, and local ornithologists confirmed that the North Roe pair had two or three different eyries. The details have been presented in the recent ***Birds of Shetland*** (Pennington et al 2004).

In 1910 the albino female lost her mate. The white widow returned to her nest on North Roe 'to gaze out over the wide horizon and wait'. I have never been able to ascertain the exact date but it was around this time that H.B. Macpherson journeyed north to photograph the sea eagle. No new male ever turned up and indeed, there may not have been any of the species left in Shetland by this time. Whether the female was indeed a true albino or just a very pale, almost white, individual is open to question. This is often said to be a product of age (and this distinctive female was known to be at least 30), but the Swedish sea eagle expert Dr Bjorn Helander has discovered other instances of such unusual plumage, not just in old adults.

One or two pairs retained a precarious presence in the Hebrides only to disappear by 1916 when, on the Isle of Skye, the last known breeding attempt was made. Two years later it is said that an old man shot the albino sea eagle in Shetland. According to George Lodge (***Memoirs of an Artist Naturalis***t 1946) she, being so distinctive, seems to have been known and indeed protected locally for nigh on 30 years - a very respectable age for any sea eagle. So not only did Harry Brewster Macpherson see one of the oldest Scottish sea eagles known, but also the very last individual left alive in Britain. Indeed, he also took the only known photograph of a truly British sea eagle.

The recent reintroduction has imported birds from Norway, and now over forty pairs are nesting in Scotland. Together, since 1985, they have reared some 283 'Gaelic-speaking' fledglings, and I am currently working on a new edition of ***The Return*** to bring the story up to date. Modern bird photographers can now take much better photographs of White-tailed Sea Eagles in Scotland than Macpherson ever did, but no one, one would hope, will ever again match his historic achievement.

John A. Love

2007–11 Bird Atlas: Summer Update and the Future

A RAFOS group in the field - Mull of Kintyre *Dave Thomas*

As I write this at the end of July, fieldwork for the breeding atlas is just coming to an end. Good weather in the early part of the summer definitely assisted our army of atlas fieldworkers enabling them to get their local squares covered. In addition many have been helping in the remoter areas of Scotland - some whilst on holiday, others by making specific atlas day trips. Help has also come from further afield. One dedicated RSPB employee used his sabbatical to cover over 20 tetrads in north west Sutherland, whilst a small team from RAFOS (Royal Air Force Ornithological Society) covered 29 tetrads in the Mull of Kintyre. In future years we will probably require even more of this sort of assistance to get full coverage of Scotland for the Bird Atlas.

Early indications are that summer coverage in Scotland has been excellent, though possibly not quite as high as that achieved during the preceding winter period. We know that Timed Tetrad counts from 2820 tetrads have been submitted on line by the end of July, and also thousands of Roving Records received. We confidently expect records to keep flooding in as these figures do not include the many records that come in on paper forms. In addition, a lot of data is still sitting in observers' notebooks as they wait for less hectic times to get a spare moment to extract it and enter it either online or on official atlas recording forms. Hopefully most of this data will get to us by the end of September, as by that stage the important validation process will be getting underway.

Validation of the thousands of atlas records, a very important part of the atlas project, will be quite a job In a project of this scale there are bound to be erroneous records that need to be fixed. Most of these will be inputting errors. These will include grid references put in with the wrong two letter prefix or with eastings and northings transposed. Here we will need to check the grid reference against the submitted place name. The wrong species may also have inadvertently been entered. Great Knot being entered instead of Red Knot is easy to spot, but others like Common Redpoll (ie the old "Mealy" Redpoll) instead of our native Lesser Redpoll can be trickier. If you do receive a query regarding one of your records, please do not be offended, we all make mistakes! Please check the record and respond promptly so that the entry can be quickly rectified.

Summer Results

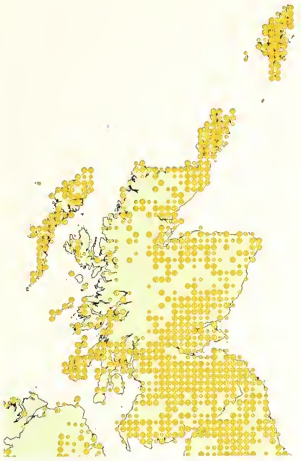
One of the questions I am most frequently asked is "which species have shown the greatest change in their distribution in Scotland since the last 1988-91 Breeding Atlas". With data in for less than 30% of the atlas squares it is difficult to be precise about this. Certainly many fieldworkers have commented on the scarcity of many of our familiar summer visitors, in particular Swift, Ring Ouzel, Whinchat, Redstart and Wood Warbler. One of the most marked declines I have noted is for Redshank. Map 1a shows their distribution recorded in 1988-91, while Map 1b shows the current distribution. It is apparent that they have disappeared from large areas of the Scottish mainland, particularly in the south and east.

Other species continue to spread north up through Scotland. The winter atlas fieldwork highlighted how Nuthatch was now widespread through many parts of southern Scotland, and how Barn Owl had spread right up into northern Scotland. Summer atlas fieldwork confirms these trends.

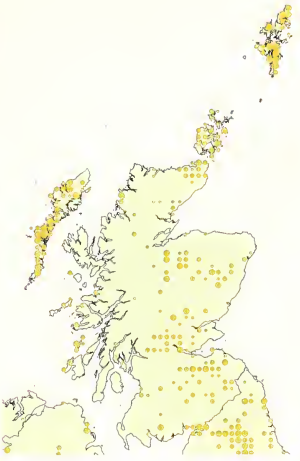
Winter work: Maintaining the momentum

Last winter we received excellent coverage with 3633 tetrads covered for timed tetrad counts, of which 86% received both an early and late visit, a tremendous achievement. In addition thousands of Roving Records were received. Map 2(below) shows the distribution of 10km squares where 8 or more tetrads were covered (red dots), 1-8 covered (yellow dots) and none covered (green). Green and yellow areas will be priority areas for future attention.

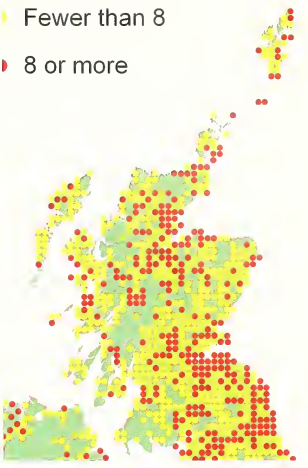
Redshank *Nigel Clark*



Redshank distribution in 1988-1991



Redshank distribution now



Coverage densities. Tetrads surveyed per 10-km square - winter

So how can you help with this important project this coming winter? If you can identify most Scottish birds by sight and sound then opting to help with **Timed Tetrad Visits** is the top priority. Each 10km square contains 25 tetrads (2x2km blocks) and a minimum of eight need to be surveyed. To find out if a square near you needs help, log onto www.birdatlas.net and click on the **request a tetrad** button. Use the map to click on the appropriate part of Scotland, then your chosen region. You will now see a map showing all the 10km squares in that region. Click on one of the white ones to find out which tetrads still require coverage. You can then contact your local atlas organiser to 'claim' these tetrads. If you have no internet access, do not despair, you can still get involved. Contact your local organiser directly or the Scottish organiser (Bob Swann, bob.swann@bto.org or on 07919 378876) to get advice on which tetrads you can cover. Remember if 8 tetrads have already been covered in your local 10km square, it is better to move to a neighbouring square with fewer than 8 covered, than to do more in your original square, unless you are involved with a local atlas(see below).

If you feel you do not have the necessary skills to do a TTV, you can still assist the project by submitting **Roving Records**. Any species seen between November and February and positively identified, can be submitted. In remote areas (or green/yellow areas on the coverage map) all such records are valuable. In the better covered (red) areas, we are keen to 'fill the gaps'. If you log onto www.birdatlas.net you will be able to type in any 10km square (ie your local one, or one you have been out birding in) and this will give you a list of what has been recorded so far for that square. Any extra species you have encountered that are not on the list should be entered as Roving Records. A species only has to be recorded once in a 10km square to become a dot on the final atlas maps. Once again, if you have no internet access, contact Bob Swann who can provide you with species lists and Roving Record forms.

Local Atlases

In some parts of Scotland, notably Lothian, Borders, Kinross, Caithness, Shetland and Arran, there are plans to produce local tetrad atlases. In these areas, every tetrad in a 10km square requires to be surveyed for TTVs and to build up complete species lists. There are huge opportunities in these areas to get involved and every record will be valuable.

Remote Areas

As time goes by, coverage will be most difficult to achieve in many of the remoter parts of Scotland where local observer coverage is very patchy. Why not consider a fieldtrip to one of these areas this winter?

A car load of bird watchers dropped off at strategic locations within a 10km square could easily cover 8 tetrads in a single day. This could be a memorable day's birdwatching, not just visiting a new area, but also testing your fieldskills as you build up species lists and gather valuable data for bird conservation all in one trip - and who knows what surprises may be in store.

Any help you can give the BTO/SOC Bird Atlas 2007-11 project will be much appreciated. We want to make the atlas a great success here in Scotland and to do so we need to get everyone involved. So if you have not already contributed please consider getting involved. If you are already involved please consider how you can help maximise coverage. Remember atlas birding is birding with a purpose - the data you gather will be used by conservationists for years to come to benefit Scotland's birds.

Bob Swann
Scottish Organiser Bird Atlas 2007-11.

Group worker John Wells covering his area *Dave Thomas*

Wading birds at Montrose Basin 1996-2005

The Basin with Montrose in the distance *Brian Cartwright*

A review of activity and trends over a ten-year period

The recent winter of 2007/2008 has been an exciting one at Montrose Basin with the appearance of both a Lesser Yellowlegs and Avocet generating lots of publicity through newspapers and television. But what of the other wading birds that are such regular visitors at this nationally important site?

During the autumn of 2007 I carried out some desk research using the records of individual observers, Angus & Dundee Bird Reports, the logbooks held at the Montrose Basin Wildlife Centre and source material for WeBS Annual Reports at the site. My aim was to try and establish what had been happening to the various species, over a ten-year period, in this fascinating and attractive group of birds. *It was a study for personal interest only and not for any scientific reasons.* Only the most numerous species were studied as they were most likely to show clear trends but also included in the study were the totals of all species of wading birds present at the site throughout the year.

Over the study period there were five occasions when wader numbers exceeded 10,000 predominantly in the months of December and January. It is a general feature that the total number of waders will increase between mid-December and mid-January. In eight of the ten years of the study this trend occurred, sometimes with significant increases taking place e.g. 1997/98 (210%) and 2004/05 (147%); however, the trend was reversed in 2002/03 when the 10419 birds recorded in mid-December 2002 fell to 6703 in mid-January 2003, a fall of 36%.

There was an unusual increase in the figures between September and October 2001 when the lowest September figure for the study period was followed by the highest October figure (the figures were taken from the WeBS data for the period). Some of the species involved in the increase had very large changes in their numbers including a doubling of the number of ***Oystercatcher***, a 60% increase in ***Lapwing***, the arrival of over 2000 ***Knot*** and an almost 150% increase in ***Redshank***. There was no similar occurrence in any other year and neither was there a consistent pattern of increases between these two months.

The obvious influence to consider is that of the weather over this period. In September, the WeBS count was taken on the 16th and in October on the 7th, so what happened in this three-week interval? According to the weather report in the Angus & Dundee Bird Report 2001, provided by Norman Elkins, there was a ridge which veered the wind to the north-east from the 17th – 19th followed by a settled spell until 23rd when winds became east to north-east - on 6th October (the day before the WeBS count) winds freshened to the south-east. In my limited experience this seems to be one of the best examples of where the influence of the weather could have had such a significant effect on numbers between the two months.

An interesting point from the figures in Table 1 is the reasonable consistency in the Seasonal Average numbers with the exception of 1996/97 and 2000/01 but even these lowest figures are very close to each other.

In every month of the autumn – spring period, at least one of the most numerous species reaches its peak number although it is not necessarily in the same month of each year as shown in Tables 2a and 2b below. Some species are quite consistent in when they choose to congregate at Montrose Basin, others far from it.

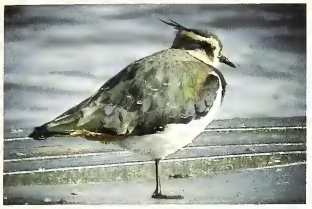
Summary of trends by species

Oystercatcher: October counts are consistently the highest of the autumn – spring period in half of the years at the beginning of the 21st century but it was the month of November which had the peak numbers in the last five years of the 20th century. The pattern of November peak numbers returned in 2005/2006. There is a consistent trend of numbers of birds present except for 2004/05 which had a low seasonal average possible affected by lower than usual numbers in November and December 2004. In this year the seasonal average fell from 1816 in 2003/2004 to 1216 in 2004/2005, a fall of 30%. Figures from WeBS annual reports covering the years 1992 – 2002 show that 4% of the Scottish average peak monthly count of Eurasian Oystercatcher is located in Angus & Dundee *(Birds of Scotland 2007)*.

Table 1 – Summary totals of wading birds present (Aug – Feb)

Autumn–Spring	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Seasonal Av.
1996/1997	4981	6912	4733	5158	6183	7287	5932	**5884**
1997/1998	3179	5253	8876	6688	4463	13830	7910	**7171**
1998/1999	5728	9298	6184	7239	9449	9789	7081	**7824**
1999/2000	4818	6992	6041	8499	4990	6835	5775	**6279**
2000/2001	4856	5705	6547	4859	5293	5889	7890	**5863**
2001/2002	3004	4210	11005	4760	9942	10868	7205	**7285**
2002/2003	3583	7019	6441	5530	10419	6703	8208	**6843**
2003/2004	7750	5185	7248	5725	7705	8937	4668	**6745**
2004/2005	4324	6800	6655	3520	4250	10509	6946	**6143**
2005/2006	6450	7670	6147	6476	7531	7831	9716	**7403**
Monthly Av.	**4867**	**6504**	**6988**	**5845**	**7023**	**8848**	**7133**	

Oystercatchers and Redshanks *Lang Stewart*



Lapwing *Jimmy Maxwell*

Lapwing: This location continues to be one of the sites in the Angus & Dundee area to hold the largest concentrations of post breeding flocks. In Great Britain, generally, the weather in November 1998 was relatively mild and may have allowed birds to remain further east than normal as evidenced by the increased numbers on eastern sites but this was not the situation at Montrose Basin where numbers were lower than in the previous year and the subsequent two years. The trends for this species occurring at the Montrose Basin do not follow any pattern in respect of the trends in Great Britain as whole. Figures from WeBS annual reports covering the years 1992 – 2002 show that 4% of the Scottish average peak monthly count of Northern Lapwing is located in Angus & Dundee *(Birds of Scotland 2007)*.

Knot: Montrose Basin is a site of national importance for this species with the months from December to February having the highest counts of any months in the autumn – spring period. Figures from WeBS annual reports covering the years 1992 – 2002 show that 12% of the Scottish average peak monthly count of Red Knot is located in Angus & Dundee *(Birds of Scotland 2007)*. In the first half of the study period there was a steady downward trend but there was significant recovery in the year 2004/2006 with figures returning to near the levels of 1996/1997.

Dunlin: Montrose Basin follows the national trend of numbers of Dunlin being highest between November and February with the highest monthly average normally being in January. The site also followed the Great Britain trend of the maxima being the extremely low in 1999-2001 years. In the first six years of the study there were somewhat erratic changes in the numbers of birds present each year but since those years the pattern of seasonal averages over the period of 2001/2002 to 2005/2006 has remained fairly constant.

Black-tailed Godwit: The large increase in the 2005/2006 figures is accounted for by the very high numbers in September (147) and October (354) in 2005. Significantly higher than average numbers were also present during the WeBS counts in these months (98 in September and 89 in October). There have been consistent numbers from 1996/1997 to 2004/2005 inclusive with the exception of 1998/1999 when there was a 50% decrease in numbers at this site. In 1999, 2000, 2003 and 2004 the Montrose Basin and its environs was the major site for this species in the Angus & Dundee area. Figures from WeBS annual reports covering the years 1992 – 2002 show that 9% of the Scottish average peak monthly count of Black-tailed Godwit is located in Angus & Dundee *(Birds of Scotland 2007)*.

Knots and Bar-tailed Godwits *Jimmy Maxwell*

Table 2a – Peak numbers by species and month

SPECIES	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-2000	2000-01
Oystercatcher	November	November	September	November	February
Lapwing	September	October	September	September	October
Knot	January	January	December	January	February
Dunlin	January	January	December	November	October
Black-tailed Godwit	August	January	November	September	November
Bar-tailed Godwit	January	January	January	November	February
Curlew	September	January	November	August	September
Redshank	October	October	September	September	October
Turnstone	December	January	November	November	January

Table 2b – Peak numbers by species and month

SPECIES	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Oystercatcher	October	January	October	October	August
Lapwing	October	September	August	October	October
Knot	January	December	December	January	February
Dunlin	December	December	January	January	February
Black-tailed Godwit	January	August	August	December	October
Bar-tailed Godwit	February	February	August	January	February
Curlew	February	August	September	August	August
Redshank	October	October	August	September	September
Turnstone	January	February	October	September	November

Bar-tailed Godwit: The numbers at this site in the winter of 2004/2005 mirrored the substantial decline in the British annual index of about 30% since the previous year. The lower numbers for this species at Montrose Basin may be a reflection of the nearby internationally important site of the Tay Estuary. Over most of the study period there has been a steady decline in numbers. Analysis of the records for this species at Montrose Basin shows that there is a matching of the Great Britain trends as identified in the WeBS Annual Reports from 1999/2000 to 2004/2005. Figures from WeBS annual reports covering the years 1992 – 2002 show that 11% of the Scottish average peak monthly count of Bar-tailed Godwit is located in Angus & Dundee *(Birds of Scotland 2007)* but the comment on the importance of the Tay Estuary in these figures must be taken into account.

Curlew: There has been a consistent level of presence over the study period (as revealed by the seasonal average numbers) following the pattern of national trends. Montrose Basin usually has the highest numbers in the month of August in line with the trend in Great Britain except in 2003 when it was in September.

Redshank: The consistent level in the number of birds present has enabled the Montrose Basin to maintain its designation as a site of international importance for this species up to a recent readjustment of the levels for this designation. From 2005/2006 Montrose Basin was re-designated as a site of national importance along with 24 other sites in Great Britain that had previously been recognised as of international importance. The trends identified in the WeBS annual reports for 1999/2000 and 2001/2003 to 2004/2005 were reflected in the numbers of this species present at this site.

Turnstone: Nationally, there was a sign that wintering numbers in Great Britain were levelling off after a long period of decline. There was a consistent trend at Montrose Basin in the first four years of the study but, although consistency has been maintained in the final four years, it has been at a 15% lower level.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the key species at Montrose Basin are ***Oystercatcher, Knot, Dunlin*** and ***Redshank***. For many of the species studied, Montrose Basin is a very good benchmark for what is happening to trends in Great Britain as a whole. *Anyone interested in receiving a copy of the full study together with the relevant Excel spreadsheets should contact the author at: brian.cartwright@zen.co.uk*

Brian Cartwright

An Orkney Odyssey

View from near Stromness to the north end of Hoy *Keith Macgregor*

Approaching Scrabster along the north coast road in Caithness, the mist intermittently thickened and Orkney, our destination, was invisible. Boarding the M.V. Hamnavoe at Scrabster there seemed little hope of seabird spotting, though the Pentland Firth was kindly calm. However halfway over visibility improved and Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills and Fulmars were numerous, plus some Gannets tailing the ship like gulls. Soon the great western cliffs of Hoy loomed and the Old Man looked even more impressive as it caught the first glint of sun breaking through.

Arriving in bustling Stromness it was summer heat, so an Orkney ice cream was fully justified. Driving to Finstown, our first week cottage stop, it soon became apparent that breeding Lapwing, Curlew and Oystercatcher were everywhere, their calls and displays with us constantly over our stay, along with Redshank, Snipe and Skylark. Early contact was made with Jim Williams the Orkney SOC Local Recorder who put us in the picture with local news and hints on best sites plus a promise to call us by mobile if anything unusual turned up.

Simply driving over some of the moorland roads in West Mainland produced Hen Harrier, Short Eared Owl and Arctic Skua and also a less common Buzzard, whilst a visit to the RSPB hide on Burgar Hill revealed a sitting Red-throated Diver. The large marsh area known as The Loons, linked to the Loch of Banks, also has a hide and apart from the now usual waders in profusion, the distant Black-tailed Godwit

Short-eared Owl *Keith Macgregor*

display call was distinctive whilst Pochard, Teal, Shoveler and Merganser were in view. A hoped-for day trip to North Ronaldsay was not possible – the plane being fully booked over two days – but a 1.5 hour ferry trip in superb weather to Sanday instead required the hire of a car on the island to cover its 15 mile length. A peaceful island of beautiful beaches, it is almost adjacent to North Ronaldsay and surely must attract similar unusual migrants. However not on this day of warm sun, but it did produce two Sandwich Terns, 25 Sanderling and 20 Turnstone in breeding plumage and some Wheatears.

Great Northern Diver *Keith Macgregor*

Shapinsay is less than 30 minutes by ferry from Kirkwall, where there is another RSPB reserve at the Mill Dam overlooked by a well-placed hide. Here no less than 11 Gadwall were in view along with broods of Shoveler and Teal, and good views of passing Arctic Skua. On making our way back to the ferry (taking in the excellent Smithy café / restaurant) a check on the mobile revealed a startling message from Jim – "Get to Evie quickly if you want to see a River Warbler". Having just missed the ferry we hoped to catch back to Kirkwall (blame the coffee stop!), it was a frustrating 2.5 hours later before we got to the village of Evie with the name of a house to look for, coupled with an indistinct map reference. After almost giving up, local help directed us to the site, which was a mini marsh habitat in an attractive garden belonging to Mrs Green, who had recognised the song as unusual, leading to the bird's discovery. A freezing wind with drizzle did not auger well for us or the bird, but in 15 minutes the distinctive 'sewing machine' song started and the bird appeared on a bare bush, spied with a scope for two to three minutes – only the second Orkney record.

The next morning, whilst checking on a brood of Gadwall and Little Grebe at Graemshall Loch in East Mainland, four starling-sized birds appeared and landed on a wall only a few feet from the car. Surely not Waxwings in mid-June, but they were and even posed for photographs with a background not of berries but buttercups! On reporting to Jim, he had heard of two on Fair Isle and one on North Ronaldsay. A short time later another

Waxwings *Keith Macgregor*

perhaps less unusual spectacle just off the first Churchill Barrier – a superb Great Northern Diver in breeding plumage. Nearby bays produced a few Bar-tailed Godwits and Sanderling, with everywhere dozens of Eider with small young.

Mull Head Local Nature Reserve provided a fine three mile walk and produced a close but not dangerous encounter with a Bonxie and two pale form Arctic Skuas on territories plus some spectacular cliff scenery with Black Guillemot and many Fulmar, some in sea pink surrounded nest sites.

Butterflies were generally scarce apart from numerous Green-veined Whites and a moth found dead at Hobbister Reserve (where more Hen Harriers) with large eye markings, which was later identified as an Emperor.

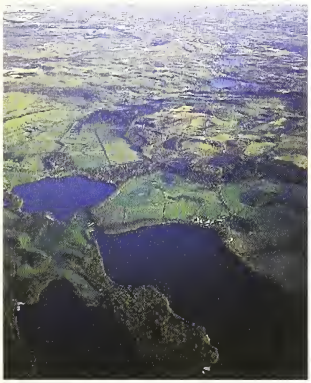
The two weeks we had on Orkney was just enough time to take in all that's on offer, not only in the natural world but also to include the magnificent St Magnus Cathedral in Kirkwall and the atmospheric Ring of Brodgar, amongst many other attractions. Not to be forgotten also is the great variety of eating out places and the friendly welcome by those lucky enough to live there.

Keith and Dorothy Macgregor

Loch of the Lowes

The hides *Scottish Wildlife Trust*

When most people hear the name of Loch of the Lowes, they think of Ospreys. In fact, the reserve began life as a special area of interest for another, entirely different organism; a rather unobtrusive (and fairly insignificant) little water plant called Slender Naiad (*Najas flexilis*). The Scottish Wildlife Trust bought the loch and gave it status as a wildlife reserve in May 1969, just a couple of weeks before an incredible, totally unexpected, event: the arrival of the loch's first pair of Ospreys. But let's start at the beginning...



Aerial View showing the 5 Lochs *Graeme Walla*

A brief history

Thirteen and a half thousand years ago, the ice that covered Scotland on-and-off during the many glaciations finally melted for good, and our landscape saw daylight for the first time in centuries. Why does this relate to Loch of the Lowes? Lowes is one of five lochs that run along the Lunan valley, which probably resulted from a part of the Tay Valley glacier gouging out the land. The resulting hollow eventually became three lochs that form part of the five loch chain: Butterstone, Craiglush and Lowes itself, joined by Clunie and Marlee to make the full quota. These three lochs are very important, as we shall see later on.

With regards to the name; there are several theories, each very interesting and different. One possibility is that Lowes originates from the Latin for Pike (*Esox lucius*), giving the (rather appropriate) name "Loch of the Pike". Another explanation has roots in boar hunting, as a place where the hounds were "lowsed", or released. And then of course there is the rather complex translation to "the Black Marsh" (quite apt given the reports of Will-O-The Wisps, or "Spunkies", floating over the loch which have been attributed to marsh gas). The final possibility is that it is nothing more than a corruption of the word "loch", which was frequently spelt "Logh" in the 17th century, and pronounced "lowe". Whatever the background of the name, it has never detracted from the visual impact and beauty of the area, earning an accolade from Queen Victoria herself who once described the loch as "very pretty".

Traditionally, the loch was lauded for its fishing. This was especially true in the 18th and 19th century, and Lowes was regarded highly for its yields of Pike, Perch, Eels and even Trout. These days, however, the fishing has all but finished and only Pike and Perch seem to be featured regularly in surveys and management reports. However, it is not fishing that people flock to the loch for these days, but it is certainly still on the agenda for something!

The fisher king

Pandion haliaetus, the Scientific name for the Osprey, derives exclusively from Greek, as opposed to Latin. Pandion was an Athenian king whose daughters prayed to the gods to be turned into birds. Meanwhile *haliaetus* comes from Halos and Aetos: essentially meaning "sea eagle". However, Ospreys are not related to *Haliaeetus albicilla* and are, in fact, a family unto themselves: Pandionidae.

Ospreys have had a closely-observed history here in Scotland; from being beautifully represented on Pictish stones (holding the famous Celtic "salmon of knowledge" in its beak) to beliefs that the Osprey would hypnotize its prey into offering itself to the raptor's great talons. Watching an Osprey hunt, it's easy to see where this belief stemmed from. Even in the Osprey's wintering grounds it is held in high regard, as Senegalese fishermen sing songs about this magnificent "king of fishermen". It's a shame that Ospreys, like many of our raptors, were persecuted to such a low point during the 19th and 20th centuries. The difference, however, is that despite seeing our misgivings and striving to undo our mistakes by reintroducing these species, Ospreys bounced back without our help. Something that could have been lost forever has managed to find a foothold and repopulate a niche that was vacant for many years.

Loch of the Lowes has been the summer home of Ospreys since 1969, and purely by chance. Although it took a few years and several attempts at building a nest they soon became comfortable with returning to the same eyrie for many years thereafter. In 1990 a part-artificial nest (essentially a wicker base wired to the tree; allowing the ospreys to build up from there) was built in the current tree, and in 1991 this was the site of the first clutch of Britain's most successful breeding Osprey.

The current female has been visiting this nest for eighteen years now, which would make her at the very least twenty-one years old, given that Ospreys, once fledged, spend several years on the west coast of Africa until they reach sexual maturity and make their long return journey to Europe. Her current mate hatched at Loch Garten in 1991 and paired up with her in the spring of 1994. He has been the father of 46 eggs to date, 38 of which have fledged successfully; a good record! As far as the female is concerned, in her 21 years she has produced 52 eggs; 50 of which have successfully hatched. Indeed, this is the first year that the full clutch of eggs has not hatched, even if not all chicks have fledged in previous years.

Osprey nest-site *Scottish Wildlife Trust*

Her fiftieth egg hatched earlier this year; on the 18th of May, after a five week incubation period. This is a crucial time for the Ospreys as there are many predators who would take the eggs given the opportunity. Although with most would-be predators such as Pine Martens, other raptors and corvids, there is not a lot we can do save accept that this is nature - there is one predator we *can* take measures against: man. During the five to six weeks between the first egg laid and the last chick hatched we conduct a 24-hour vigil that is maintained by a very dedicated army of volunteers from almost all over Scotland. Thankfully egg-collecting has dwindled in this country, thus giving our birds (not just Ospreys) a chance at repairing their damaged numbers. Once all the chicks have hatched their lives are out of our hands. It is then up to the parents for approximately seven and eight weeks until fledging. Possibly due to the undivided attention from both of them, this year the single chick fledged a couple of days earlier than anticipated. Of course the male, who does the vast majority of fishing (the female only resorting to this in times of desperation), invariably brings in enough fish for at least the largest chick of a brood.

The chick this year won't necessarily have eaten much more than usual, since generally it will eat its fill and not more, but it has been given the chance of more frequent meals and no competition from siblings. This lack of competition may also have contributed to the early fledging (since the chick would not feel bound to the nest and could return for feeding), which presumably may have been akin to learning to ride a bicycle for the first time... where the glee of achievement and feeling of freedom gives a sense of euphoria before the terror and realisation of what is actually happening kicks in! By late July the chick was taking full advantage of its newly found abilities and was beginning to show some interest in fishing, beginning to hover over the loch and even fold its wings in for very brief periods, although it still had to build enough confidence to make the plunge. Certainly it should have perfected this technique by the end of August, when it will be readying itself to make its very first winter migration; an astonishing 3,000 mile journey skirting the coasts of France, Spain and Portugal and passing by North Africa before finishing this epic exodus in either Gambia or Senegal.

Female Osprey (from HD Scan) *Graeme Walla*

Of course, it is not just the Senegalese fishermen who have something to say about fishing Ospreys. Butterstone, a stocked loch nearby, regularly hosts stunned anglers who are lucky enough to witness the male Osprey fishing for rainbow trout. Many hasten to the visitor centre at Lowes to report their sighting with much awe and excitement (and perhaps sometimes a hint of jealousy).

A wandering wonder

Of course, Loch of the Lowes being a wildlife reserve, there is much more than Ospreys to see. Indeed the loch has received a rather unusual visitor which seems to have taken up summer residence.

Of all the water-dwelling birds seen this summer, perhaps the least expected, but no less spectacular, to be seen on this Perthshire loch has been a Great Northern Diver. Juveniles have sometimes been spotted on Highland lochs, but this individual was in full breeding plumage, which opens a whole Pandora's Box of questions. Great Northern Divers should still be in Greenland, Canada and Iceland in summer until their breeding season begins to wrap up, and shouldn't really be arriving on our shores until August. Quite what this particular diver was doing on Lowes in July was anybody's guess. The most probable explanation is that the diver has traveled to the loch after a failed breeding attempt. Since only one has been

reported, this is most likely the case. Loch of the Lowes is probably not an ideal breeding site for these birds in any event. We can but hope, however!

The staff at the visitor centre always maintains that the Ospreys are the star of the show for most visitors to Lowes, but if that's the case then there's a large support cast! Common birds mix with rarer birds, and early summer boosts numbers at the feeding stations of the visitor's centre. There have been Bramblings visiting on passage to their summer breeding grounds as well as a single Slavonian Grebe earlier in the season. The more common species found at the loch still offer a vast array of shapes, sizes and vibrant colours, from pairs of elegant Great-crested Grebes to a family of Goosanders. As well as "family favourites" such as Blue Tits, Robins and Wrens there are more unusual species such as Great-spotted Woodpeckers and Yellowhammers, which seem to be rapidly on the decline. There is also a local Jay which frequents the feeding stations and brings a little regal beauty to any visitors fortunate enough to spot this usually elusive bird, known in Gaelic as "Schreachag Choille"; the "screamer of the woods". Quite a sinister and chilling name for such a magnificent bird, and yet so apt considering the call it emits.

But it is not just the birds that call the loch home. Undoubtedly the non-avian stars of the show must be the charismatic Red Squirrels. The mixed woodland is a haven for them, giving year-round food, and allowing several of these normally solitary animals to tolerate each other. Scotland has become the last stronghold of the Red Squirrel due to competition with Grey Squirrels. Although "Greys" are not directly antagonistic towards our native Reds, they are bigger, more brazen, and possess a more powerful spatial memory for recalling caches of food. All these combine with perhaps the most devastating factor in the threat of the Red Squirrel by the Grey: Squirrel *parapoxvirus*; or Squirrel-pox. However, because of steps taken by many conservationists Red Squirrels are beginning to recover in places, and Greys are being controlled. There are now many areas where it is possible to see Red Squirrels, and Loch of the Lowes supports several individuals. This never subtracts the magic of seeing a Red Squirrel, no matter how many times one meets them.

Darkness falls

Sunset marks the emergence of a whole host of new species to the loch and surrounding area. The most obvious are the owls, of which the Tawny is most prominent as males hoot though the night to assert territory. The surrounding area may also hold some interesting treats; the hills leading to Loch Ordie are said to be haunted by Nightjars, a very rare and unusual bird, linked with rather sinister folklore; named "goatsuckers" by some because of the belief that they would feed on goat's milk during the night, leaving the livestock dry the next morning. The North American Nightjar is called the Whippoorwill, particularly in New England, and was believed to congregate outside the window of the dying, waiting to catch the departing soul before it could reach the afterlife. This legend was used to great effect in the *Dunwich Horror*, a short story by American author H. P. Lovecraft.

Many nocturnal mammals also live and hunt around the loch, from Pine Martens to bats. Pine Martens are making something of a comeback in this country after many years of persecution for their fur. This has been hailed not only as a success for the species, but also as a boon of sorts for the Red Squirrel. It was found in a study in 2007 that Pine Martens could be more inclined to predate Grey Squirrels due to their larger size (thus preventing them from reaching the smaller, lighter branches) and because of their more terrestrial tendencies.

A resident Red Squirrel *Graeme Walla*

Although many species of British bats are in decline (and indeed all bat species are protected in Britain) there are still a few species that are managing to maintain a foothold. Common Pipistrelles, in fact one of three species under the same genus and Daubenton's Bats seem to be faring quite well (or at least better than several other species) at the moment, and both can be found within the vicinity of the loch. The Pipistrelles, perhaps the most familiar of bat species, flitter around the trees usually about half an hour before sunset, munching as many as 3,000 midges a night. The Daubenton's Bat, marginally larger than a Pipistrelle and with a silvery belly, tends to hunt over water; appearing after sunset. Bats, of the order *Chiroptera*, are actually genetically more closely related to humans than they are to rodents. This is easy to understand when looking at the wings, which look very much like very elongated human digits: The term "*Chiroptera*" actually stems from Greek meaning "hand wing".

Out on the loch there are frequent sightings of Otters, perhaps one of the most well-known indicator species of clean bodies of freshwater. There are a couple of known holts around the loch, and they are most often spotted in front of the channel that links Craiglush and Lowes, which reputably was excavated in a failed attempt to drain the land between the two lochs in the 19th Century. However, lucky individuals have spotted Otters swimming in the reeds in front of the hides, and even a mother with pups earlier in the year.

Journey's end

There is plenty of wildlife to see at Loch of the Lowes, whether birds, mammals or the ever-present invertebrates. Lowes presents an excellent opportunity to get up close to the iconic, the charismatic, the majestic and the downright cute animals that populate our unique and wonderful country. And to think, we owe it all to a rather unobtrusive (and fairly insignificant) little water plant called Slender Naiad.

Graeme Walla, Perthshire Ranger, Scottish Wildlife Trust
gwalla@swt.org.uk

Immature Goosanders *Jimmy Maxwell*

NOTES & COMMENT

Double Acts

Continuing the emphasis in this column on multi-species interaction, Jonathan Osborne sends us three of his own "behavioural" favourites.

Cormorant & Black-headed Gull: one of the "middle" pictures of a series taken at Bemersyde SWT reserve. The Cormorant flew in and was minding its own business when along came the gull, had a few words and eventually forced the Cormorant to leave. I like the way they appear to be having a conversation!

Cormorant and B-h Gull *Jonathan Osborne*

Eider Duck & Herring gull: another one of a series, this time at South Queensferry, where a female Eider with ducklings took great exception to the presence of a Herring Gull that got a bit close for her liking. Most of the "fight" shots are just bodies and feathers and splashing water, but I rather like this one which appears to show the Eider head-butting the gull in the back!

Herring Gull and Eider *Jonathan Osborne*

Magpie & Fox: this photo was taken at Silverknowes promenade at nine o'clock in the morning. A rather scabby young fox was wandering around the end of the promenade completely oblivious to the presence of the parked cars, before deciding to have a rest in the grass. It seemed equally unconcerned when a rather nosey Magpie calmy walked up and started to give it a piece of its mind ! Sadly the "helpful" occupant of another vehicle walked across to ask whether I had seen the fox, causing both the fox and the Magpie to walk away before I had the chance to see how the meeting was going to unfold ! In the picture it looks as if the Magpie is playing a new version of the children's game "Can you hear me Mr.Wolf?"

Hope these are of interest - other "before and after" pictures available if anyone wishes to see them.

Jonathan Osborne

The Raven's return to Glasgow

It is not known when the Raven was lost as a street scavenger of the oldest parts of Glasgow, but suffice to say a very long time ago. So there was more than a little interest shown in an article which appeared last year in the Herald(8/6/2007) mentioning that a pair of Ravens had been observed prospecting for a nest site within the city boundaries. The location proved to be a gas storage installation at Temple near Anniesland Cross, the two huge gasometers there dominating the surrounding skyline.

On 17th February and my first visit to the site in 2008, from a vantage point outside of the secure perimeter fence, the Ravens were seen carrying lining material to an already built stick nest. This was concealed in one of the "boxes" formed at the intersections of the outer cage-work to the taller of the gasometers. A follow-up check on 14th March confirmed that the female was sitting on eggs, with periodic appearances at the nest by the male. Six further observational visits were made over the next two months, the last on 18th May.

Magpie and Fox *Jonathan Osborne*

The 2008 gasometer site *John Mitchell*

Two young – by this time on the wing, were soliciting the parent birds for food.

Back in 2007, one of the housing schemes adjoining the gas installation was given nationwide coverage in BBC2's *Springwatch* programme featuring the lives of urban foxes. From the number of sightings I had at Temple this spring it would appear that this particular family of town foxes is still doing well, despite facing competition from the Glaswegian Ravens for the feeding opportunities to be had from carelessly discarded take-away meals.

John Mitchell

Heron and Cranes on Lewis

Another two interesting shots from Frank. He writes:

1. As you probably know, trees are pretty rare up here on Lewis and so some Herons adapt by building their nests on cliffs – four youngsters in this one.

2. This Common Crane is appropriately using Stornoway Airport runway for take-off!

Frank Stark

Heron nestlul *Frank Stark*

Avian Concord! *Frank Stark*

Caption Competition

Provide a caption for the bird picture below and have a chance of winning an SOC item. Each SBN edition will feature a new photo. The winner and other best captions will be shown in SBN 90. Send your single caption by E-mail to jimmy.maxwell @virgin.net (or of course by mail to the SOC – see Page 3).

Mute Swans and Greylag Goose Jimmy Maxwell

The winning Caption from SBN 88 (see photo below) came from Lang Stewart with – "Both wings out, shake them all about, Ho-okey… " Well done. Other runner-ups were "So, you want to play with the big boys!" – John Reid, and "Anything you can do I can do better!" from Nick Carter and also Jennifer Spring-Smyth.

Mallard and Cormorant James Scrimgeour

Great Bustard reintroduction on Salisbury Plain

Many readers will be familiar with the reintroduction of the Red Kite and the White-tailed Eagle, two remarkably successful programmes which are resulting in these enigmatic species gracing our countryside in increasing numbers despite continued illegal persecution.

Whilst 'over the border' recently, I had the opportunity to visit another British reintroduction programme – that of the Great Bustard on Salisbury Plain, Wiltshire. Hunted to extinction in Britain in the 1840s, the Great Bustard is a remarkable bird. Indeed, it has been claimed that individuals over 20kg have existed, making them the heaviest flying bird. Strongholds of the species were on Salisbury Plain, in East Anglia and Yorkshire and since 1840, the only individuals in Britain have been those occasional vagrants straying from other countries. Sadly, probably due to its large bulk, the Great Bustard was a frequent quarry for hunters of the day, and coupled with changes in farmland, extinction was inevitable.

The *Great Bustard Group* (GBG), since its inception in 1998, has looked at the possibility of releasing Great Bustards in the UK. Fortunately, after a feasibility study was carried out, the GBG was issued with a ten year licence to do so in 2003. At Saratov, Russia, Great Bustard eggs are collected from nests which are doomed to failure as a result of agricultural activities These are then hatched and the chicks reared until old enough to be safely flown to the UK and released into a special pen on Salisbury Plain, after the necessary quarantine and health checks. The release pen – which is used to acclimatise the birds – provides a safe haven which is planted out with species of crop attractive to the birds. Since the pen is unroofed, this enables the birds to disperse into the wider countryside as and when they chose, however, as the species shows great site fidelity, many do return to the area. In spring of last year, the first Great Bustard clutch to be laid on British soil since 1832 was discovered. Sadly, these particular eggs were infertile, however it is hoped successful breeding will occur very soon.

I visited the project on an exceptionally wet midweek day in early July 2008. Indeed, as I had made the booking some days before during better weather, and travelled fifty miles from my base in Somerset, I feared for the worst! Upon arriving at the host farm, myself and two other birdwatchers were driven by a GBG volunteer in a Land Rover up the side of the gently rolling downs to an observation hide overlooking the release pen on the other side of the small valley. From this well-equipped hide, we were able to locate six Great Bustards feeding amongst the vegetation in the pen. These birds are very impressive, even from a distance, and although we were afforded good views, I was somewhat surprised by how inconspicuous these bulky birds can be in vegetation. During over an hour in the hide, we were given an informative history of the project and there was plenty of

Great Bustard taxidermy specimen at the GBG centre James Towill

opportunity for questions, comment and discussion. The area around the release pen is organic farmland and the display of wildflowers was truly beautiful. Other species noted that day included several Stonechats and singing Corn Buntings, however the area also holds Montagu's Harrier and Stone Curlew, the latter having actually bred near the release pen. The evocative songs of the buntings and Linnets were punctuated by the sound of explosions coming from the nearby military training land! To round off the visit, we returned to the small GBG visitor centre where a range of merchandise was on offer and there was the opportunity to see just how big these birds are at close quarters with a stuffed specimen on display! This excellent visit cost just £7 and I have to say it was worth every penny; certainly it is somewhat easier than trying to locate individuals elsewhere on the Plain with all its military activities and access restrictions. To see a species such as this in beautiful (if not slightly damp) British countryside is a real ornithological treat.

Further information and details about visiting the scheme can be obtained at www.greatbustard.com or by email enquiries@greatbustard.com

James Towill

A view of the release area on Salisbury Plain James Towill

Council helps Dippers

Since 1993 I have been recording nests, and ringing nestlings and free-flying Dippers during the breeding season, in part of the Moorfoot Hills, Scottish Borders.

At one particular site – Blackhope Bridge – successive pairs of Dippers nested in a crevice which had opened up in the concrete and steel roof of the bridge in 1996. The first breeding attempt (successful) that season was in a drainpipe in the wall of the bridge, but the pair then moved into the crevice for their second attempt (again successful).

From the 1997 season onwards the crevice site proved very secure (requiring step-ladder access) and successful, with second broods produced almost annually. However, it became clear that bridge repair works would be required at some point and, in 2007, redecking works were announced and were conducted after the breeding season. In fact, the pair nesting in 2007 was of some interest since the male was from a 2006 brood 750m downstream, and the female was from a 2006 brood 32km away in the Lammermuir Hills.

Given that the site had been so successful over 11 breeding seasons, I contacted Scottish Borders Council to see if some mitigating work could be carried out to allow Dippers to continue to breed there in future years. Mr Bill Jamieson of the Council's Structures Section was instrumental in getting a timber batten fitted on one of the new walls of the bridge at 2.0m., so that a nestbox could be installed without penetration of the new concrete.

This was fitted in February 2008 and I awaited the breeding season to see what would transpire. The same Dipper pair as in 2007 was present, but opted to nest under an overhang of the bank alongside the burn about 50m upstream of the bridge. However, a pair of Pied Wagtails nested successfully in the box provided for the Dippers!

It remains to be seen what future seasons bring but, given that the crevice had to be sacrificed in the interests of road safety, then Scottish Borders Council are to be congratulated for at least providing alternative nest sites for Dippers and other species.

So, if you find that a traditional nest site is threatened by roadworks, don't hesitate to contact your local council's highways section – hopefully they'll be just as accommodating!

Tom Dougall

BIRDSPOT:

This new feature BIRDSPOT is devised and written by ***Clive McKay****, Scottish Bird Records Co-ordinator, SOC, Waterston House. It is designed to point up the ID and interesting features of Scottish birds and will show new birds in each edition of* SBN. *As members you can participate by sending Clive any particularly special bird photos showing interesting plumage, postures or behaviour. Send your image at fairly high resolution ie 700k or unaltered on a CD.*

Mallard x Pintail hybrid *John Kemp*

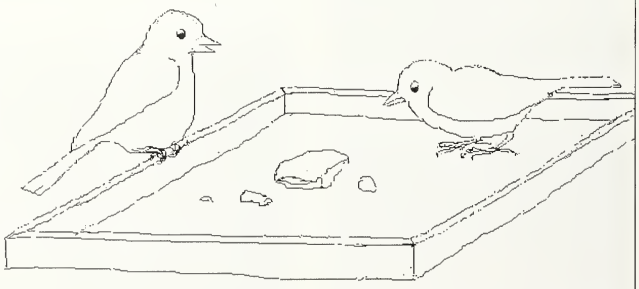
Mystery drake?

This bird was photographed by John Kemp on South Uist on 12 Nov 2007. It is clearly a hybrid between a Mallard and Pintail, showing features of both in almost equal amounts. Luckily it's a male, so the features are easy to see – identification would have been a mite trickier had it been a female! The tail pattern, the white neck ring and the green head suggest Mallard, whilst the longish tail, the grey bill and the pattern on the flanks suggest Pintail. Hybrids are common amongst wildfowl and can pose some tricky ID problems. Perhaps this bird came from Iceland where breeding Pintails are relatively scarce, and where perhaps a shortage of mates may have led to a Mallard opting for this unusual pairing. On second thoughts, what better choice could you make than a Pintail?

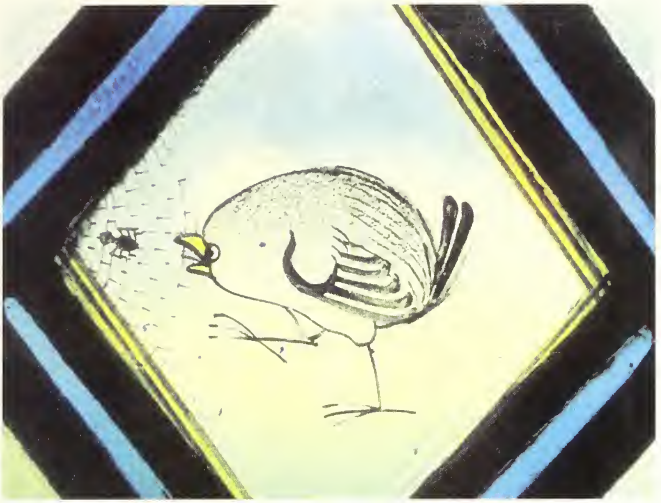
Merlin *John Bowler*

Merlin hanging out to dry

This Merlin was photographed by John Bowler, RSPB officer on Tiree, in January 2008 and really captures the atmosphere of a bright winter's day on this lovely island. From the bird's horizontal stance it looks like it was a windy day – nothing new there for Tiree! But why has the bird got its tail feathers spread? This is the characteristic posture of a bird that has just had a bath - also indicated by the damp belly feathers. After bathing, many birds will also hold their wings drooped out to the side with the primary feathers spread, in the classic heraldic posture. This shouldn't be mistaken for sunning behaviour, in which most birds lie on their sides with their wings raised and a blissful look in their eyes! John photographed this bird at Gott Moor whilst carrying out a winter goose count - it had been bathing in a small puddle on the track that he was driving along. The buff tips to the feathers on the mantle suggest that this is a first-winter bird (an adult's feathers would lack these tips). The uniform thickness of the dark and pale bars on the tail rule out the possibility of the so-called "Taiga Merlin" of North America. Merlins do not breed on Tiree but are common on passage and throughout the winter, and probably include Icelandic birds as well as Scottish breeders. For up to date information on the birds of Tiree, you can do no better than the newly published *Birds of Tiree and Coll* (Bowler & Hunter 2007).



Things must be getting really tough - last month niger seed and sultanas, now stale bread !



Stained glass from York Minster - 14th Century *Michael Thomas*

Ornithological Folklore
6. The Winter Wren

Although the Wren is almost the smallest bird in Scotland [the Goldcrest is smaller as measured by body weight], it has the longest scientific [Latin] name: *Troglodytes troglodytes troglodytes*

Troglodytes derives from the Greek word meaning 'to creep into holes'.

The Wren is the most widespread bird in Scotland. The new Birds of Scotland estimates the total of occupied territories to be 1,365,950, and in winter, with the year's fledglings included, the total population may reach 8 million. Many birds will succumb during harsh winter conditions. This count may be compared with that of the Chaffinch whose winter population is estimated to be 3.5-3.8 million.

The male Wren builds up to 6 nests in his territory and the female selects one in which to lay her eggs. In winter, Wrens roost communally in an old nest [box]. There is a record of 60 birds roosting in a Norfolk nestbox, measuring only 14x11.5x14.5cm.

The Scottish Wren comes in four varieties. The Winter Wren is the common name, but in addition there are three recognised races: the St. Kilda, Shetland and Hebridean Wren. The Wren is a very sedentary species [unlike the Goldcrest, many of which migrate south in the winter], hence the island races, isolated from the mainland species.

'spunky wee Wren' *Lang Stewart*

The Winter Wren was originally an American species which spread across the Bering straits and into Asia during the Pleistocene period, probably reaching Britain as late as the end of the Ice Age.

The Wren has a special place in Celtic folklore. It was hunted in Ireland, Scotland and the Isle of Man as part of a Celtic ritual. In Galloway, boys went out hunting for Wrens on the morning of New Year's Day. When caught they were released with ribbons tied to their legs. The ceremony was called the 'Deckon o' the Wren'. There is also a tradition of stoning Wrens to death on St. Stephen's Day in commemoration of the saint's martyrdom. In Ireland and the Isle of Man wren-hunting traditions were observed into the 20th Century - this is a photograph of a Wren Hunt taken in 1967 in County Clare (from Mark Cocker's Birds Brittanica).

A Wren hunt in 1967 *Birds Brittanica*

The Celtic association is conformed by this Breton song about a spindly wee Wren.

THE DEATH OF THE WREN
One day I went for a walk, and then
What should I catch but a spunky wee Wren.

I held him fast; he couldn't get out,
Penned in the cow-house he quickly got stout.

When he'd grown fat and had put on weight,
Up came the butcher to settle his fate.

When he arrived and the lads he led,
The din they made would have wakened the dead.

Off he skedaddled to save his life,
When the butcher brandished his carving knife.

Four sturdy wagons with steel shod wheels
Rolled off to Nantes stuffed with his quills.

When they departed they left enough stuff
Four feather beds to pack with his fluff.

That Norfolk nest box contained enough material to start a duvet industry!!! Happily today's Wrens are unmolested, their only enemy being very cold weather.

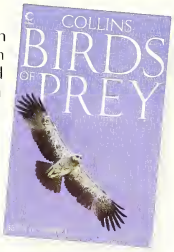
Michael Thomas

BOOK REVIEWS

We repeat the following book's title which was omitted due to an error in SBN *88:*

Where to Watch Birds: Southern and Western Spain. 3rd Edition**.** Ernest Garcia and Andrew Paterson, species vignettes by Stephen Message. Christopher Helm. ISBN:978-0-7136-8315-8 Paperback £16.99

Collins Birds of Prey. Benny Gensbol, illustrations by Bjarne Bertel.(English translation of 2004 Danish edition). 2008. Harper Collins, London ISBN 978-0007248148, Hardback. 414 pages. £30



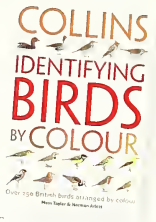
This is the 4th edition of this book, which was first written and published in Danish in 1984. English translations of earlier editions were published as Collins Guides to the birds of prey of Britain and Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. This edition is presented as a handbook to the "Birds of Prey of Europe, North Africa and the Near East". It includes new information on distribution and population trends, new improved bird photographs, some of which are stunning, and a new set of excellent (mainly flight) identification illustrations by the artist Bjarne Bertel.

The book is divided into 3 main parts. First, there is a long Introduction which contains sections dealing with the adaptations of birds of prey to their environment and lifestyle, and with their food, hunting methods, migration, breeding biology and the various threats which they currently face. Next there are species descriptions for each of the 49 raptor species covered, including distribution maps, tables of numbers in different countries and current status, and greater detail concerning migration, habitat and biology. Then there are the identification sections for each of the species, with illustrations showing all the different plumage variations, and helpful comments on how to distinguish between similar species. A bibliography is provided where references for different species are for some reason divided into non-German and German sections! There is also a list of the names of the 49 species in 10 European languages.

I bought a copy of this book for myself because I liked the photographs and illustrations, and because of its up-to-date information about each species. However, I do have a few reservations. For example, it contains no discussion of the adaptive value of the sexual dimorphism in size in many raptors, which is most pronounced in bird-eating species, and having to flip between the species descriptions and identification sections is a bit tedious. But my main complaint concerns the Bibliography. OK, this is not a British book, so one would not necessarily expect to see much British work referred to, but the sources of much of the factual information in the text, including some that is Scottish, are clearly not in the Bibliography at all. The only Poyser monograph there is Andrew Village's "The Kestrel" (1990), and the only reference there to British work on the Peregrine Falcon is from the 2003 *Devon Bird Report*!

John Savory

Collins Identifying Birds by Colour. Moss Taylor and Norman Arlott. 2008. Harper Collins, London ISBN-13 978 - 0 - 00 - 720679 - 7 224 pages. Paperback £12.99



A further new identification book, but with a different approach and aimed more at the novice birdwatcher, covering more than 250 species in the UK. Good introductory paragraphs cover features such as moult, migration, etc. and explain the rather complex approach on how to use the book. Obviously colour is the key feature but due to the very nature of plumage and its potential variation such as seasonal, it soon becomes apparent that duplication of the good but sometimes over-coloured illustrations could cause some confusion particularly as there are no cross references except in the index. Thus many species appear on up to four different pages with the Goosander on five and the Linnet on six.

Seasonal occurrence and distribution are well covered, but for instance Corn Bunting is shown as common and Nuthatch as very common without further comment, which could be misleading. Beginners however, will have fun working their way through the book to reach a conclusive identification. Lastly it's good to see the SOC appearing under useful addresses.

Keith Macgregor

The Wildlife Gems of Islay. A DVD filmed and produced by Gordon Yates. £15.00 + £1 postage – sale from Gordon Yates, details at wildlife@gordon-yates.com

I was delighted to be asked to review this DVD as I love the Scottish islands and have visited Islay several times over the years. Throughout the whole film, the footage of the animals, birds and plants is really wonderful with not only good clear images but also their sounds, and particularly the sounds of the sea, wind and hail!

I think the west coast islands have their own special magic, all with a certain something that links them, but each unique - the colours of the sea and sand, the clear atmosphere, the lack of pollution, the solitude, the calls of the birds, the colourful machair, the wonderful close views of the wildlife and the sound of the seas breaking over the rocks. But perhaps Islay, washed by the Gulf Stream and with its range of habitats, can lay claim to be the "Jewel of the Hebrides". Certainly, something attracts the thousands of geese visiting it each winter.

Gordon Yates has been making wildlife films of Islay for more than thirty years and this DVD is the culmination of these. He includes more than ninety species of birds, mammals like otters, red deer and seals, butterflies and many of its wildflowers. His introduction is an overview of the island, with several keys species highlighted, but then it changes with no clear indication, to a seasonal journey, starting not with spring but with the return of the geese in autumn. These geese, the Barnacles and Greenland Whitefronts, are what makes the island famous, along with the rare Choughs and broad diversity of wildlife. (A whisky drinker might disagree, as Islay malts are very famous too!) Gordon leads us through the seasons, with a very clear but perhaps slightly laboured commentary, and the volume seems to fluctuate. Possibly, if I am nitpicking, there are a little too many sunrises and sunsets, though they are spectacular! He certainly brings out the atmosphere of the island, its changeable weather, its seasonable timetable, its fabulous scenery and its amazing wildlife. When you visit islands for birdwatching, you cannot help noticing the whole picture – scenery, plants, insects and animals. When watching this DVD you will lose yourself for an hour, immersed in the magic of Islay, and wish you could go back there tomorrow. It really is aptly named – "The Wildlife Gems of Islay"

Janet Crummy

Rare Birds Yearbook 2008. Edited by Erik Hirschfeld. Birdlife International (BLI) ISBN 978-0-9552607-3-5 273 pp. Fully illustrated. Softback £18.95 (of which £4 goes to BLI).

This is about the world's 189 species that are critically endangered. The treatment

of each one varies, from half page for a little known species, to eight pages for the Balearic Shearwater. These accounts are fascinatingly written, covering various aspects from population to conservation action.

However there are several splendid chapters at the beginning of the book, varying from people who have recently discovered new species, to ecotourism. There are many terrific photographs as well as paintings of birds not yet filmed. I found the great thing about this book was its readability with the added advantage that some of your purchase money went back to conserving endangered species. There will be a 2009 edition.

Frank Hamilton

Kingfisher's Fire. Peter Harris, Cover Illustration John Busby, 2008. Monarch Books, ISBN 9 7 8 - 1 - 85424-848-0 (UK), 978-0-8254-6182-8 (USA), Paper Back £ 7.99 (UK), $ 12.99 (USA)

This is the story of Evangelical Christians who found that 'our belief in a beautiful world was challenged by the rapid devastation taking place before our appalled gaze.' Peter Harris had found that in some countries very few Church leaders had any environmental awareness of the concept of Christian Stewardship. In these countries, christian communities prepared for life after death before caring for the environment in this world. So they established a worldwide network of Conservation Centres – 'A Rocha', 'in an attempt to combat environmental degradation by research, education and campaigning'. The first Centre was in Portugal where they had to 'convince the local population of the wisdom of ringing not hunting'. (a familiar story) The field study centre is an integral part of each A Rocha Centre - some have also been set up in urban areas. The most telling photographs in the book are the before and after shots of a marshland area in Lebanon, showing the change from degraded desert to restored wetland.

This is also the story of individuals and their struggle to bring environmental awareness and conservation to many parts of the world.

Harriet Trevelyan.

Where to Watch Birds: North West England and the Isle of Man, 3rd Edition, Allan Conlin, Dr J P Cullen, Pet Marsh, Tristan Reid, Chris Sharpe, Judith Smith, Stephen Williamson, Line drawings and vignettes David Mead. 2008, Christopher Helm, ISBN 978-0-7136-6421-8, Paper Back, £16.99

One of a series of guides published by the Christopher Helm part of A & C Black Publishers, this 3rd Edition has been revised, updated and new sites added. The series employs a standard format: *Habitat, Species, Access* (how to find the site, and access restrictions where known), *timing* (effect of tides, visitor numbers etc), *Calendar* (the species to be expected for each season), the Land Ranger Map(s) which cover the site and the Grid References.

This volume covers North England west of the Pennines from the Border with Scotland to Southern Border of Cheshire and also the Isle of Man. This is an area with a wide variety of habitats: hill and moor land, raised bog, pasture and arable land, towns and conurbations, post-industrial sites including mining subsidence flashes and water filled quarries, coastal beaches and mudflats, estuaries and reservoirs. As would be expected from an area with such a diversity of habitats, there are over 300 in the species list. A good area for a bird watching holiday.

There are descriptions of 91 sites subdivided into 10 geographic areas. Six of the seven authors acknowledge help and contributions from others who often have detailed local knowledge and there is a sketch map of each site.

There are Indexes of the sites covered and species, and the sites where they have been recorded. This is a comprehensive guide which should help both the generalist and those who are intent on adding to their lifetime list.

Harriet Trevelyan

The Lapwing. Michael Shrubb , 2007. T&A D Poyser 978-0-7136-6854-4 Hard Back £40.00.

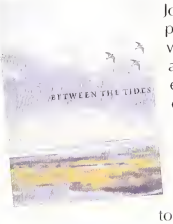
With its striking plumage and distinctive *pee-wit* call, the Lapwing is one of Britain's best known birds. Lapwings depend on agricultural land for breeding and are considered to be a barometer of the health of this habitat; the population has crashed over recent decades, largely due to changes in farming practices. In winter, Lapwings switch to coastal areas and to wetlands, including those in urban areas, where large, noisy flocks can gather.

The Lapwing is a concise yet authoritative monograph of this popular species. A thorough review of Lapwing biology contains sections on population dynamics , feeding ecology, habitat use, migration, and conservation; there is an impressive detailed review of our understanding of breeding biology, plus discussion of other species in the genus. The author extensively reviews existing data sets to illustrate long term population trends in both the UK and Europe. Although there has been a population decline in the species since the 1960s, it is encouraging to hear that there is some evidence of a population recovery in some areas due to improved winter survival and positive agri-environment schemes.

The author is a retired farmer and has studied both the wintering and breeding ecology of the Lapwing in Sussex. His enduring passion and work on this species certainly comes through in his book Of interest to both amateur naturalist, who will enjoy remarkable insights into the birds' lives, and to academics, who will appreciate the broad overview of current research, the lapwing will remain the definitive work on the species for many years to come and is a superb addition to the Poyser series of species monographs.

Mike Thornton

Between the Tides Written and illustrated by John Threlfall, 2007. Published by Langford Press ISBN 978-1-904078-23-4 Hardback, price £38.00.



John Threlfall uses his poems, text and art work (field sketches and set pieces) to express his feeling of engagement with the intertidal foreshore. His approach is summed up as 'to look is to grasp something, to see is to be grasped by it' (Frederick Franks); not to be led by expectations but 'with time and patience to immerse myself in what is' and 'so create a painting in its own right while preserving the emotions of the field-based sketch'. His pencil and water colour sketches aim to capture the essence of each subject.

The Section headings show his holistic approach; Dawning, tides, salt marsh... birds etc, each prefaced by a quotation from prominent naturalists. The underlying

message is 'treat the land with love and respect, not as a commodity to be used' (Aldo Leopold).

To get the best out of this book the reader-seers must also immerse themselves in the poems, artwork and prose. 'An Estuary is not so much a place as a feeling'. He has for me achieved his aim - this book conveys the essence of the foreshore.

Harriet Trevelyan

True to Form. Author and Illustrator David Bennett, 2007, Langford Press. ISBN 978-1-904078-30-2, Hardback, Price £38-00.

This is first and foremost a sketch book: no page numbers, no index and the publisher's information is at the back of the book. It is the result of many hours in the field observing and putting what he sees onto paper. The pictures mostly speak for themselves; what text there is, is handwritten and though most of the pictures are prefaced by explanatory text, some, such as the thrush among the rowans, have no written information.

Even the full page set pieces have a feeling of immediacy; the style is loose, often very loose, mostly in pen and ink, watercolour and pastel. He sets the birds in their habitat, where as in life, it is sometimes difficult in a loosely executed painting to see the bird. A Kingfisher is just a flash of blue among a tangle of riverside herbage.

The big pictures would make challenging jigsaw puzzles.

This is an inspiring work, but the lack of page numbers makes it difficult to recommend a particular picture to you. Simply get this book and enjoy it!

Harriet Trevelyan

An Unforgettable Challenge, G.J.Barnes. 2008. Pub. Perry Barnes. ISBN: 978-0-9822281-0-3 Paperback £5.

For those members of the SOC who visited Fair Isle when Gordon Barnes was Assistant Warden, this book is probably required reading. More than half the book is a memoir of Gordon's life as a crofter, and the text conveys graphically the nature of making a living on a remote and exposed island. You have to wait until page 59 before many birds come into focus, but his section is well written with rarities the main feature. Bill Oddie's Thrush Nightingale brought back to Setter in his sock, the Great Bustard [featured on the cover]; the first British River Warbler; Pallas' Warbler and White-throated Sparrow - both new birds for Fair Isle.

The book contains two Appendices, one listing the 15 species new to Britain recorded on Fair Isle - the other, Gordon's own new birds list, 1960-1975.

Unpretentious, atmospheric - this is a must for any Fair Isle visitor, past, present or future.

Michael Thomas

Collins Scottish Birds by Valerie Thom, Illustrations by Norman Arlott, Gaelic names by Calum Campbell. Collins ISBN 978-0-00-727068-2, Paperback £9.99.

This perennial field guide has been republished several times since the first imprint in 1994. It focuses on 180 mostly common species and a few which are more rare. The birds are grouped by habitat, well-illustrated with key pointers to identification included. There is a lot of information available in this small book, suited to both any visitors and residents of Scotland who are curious about the birds, their nomenclature (Gaelic name also included), habitats and the best places to see them. This publication is on sale at Waterston House.

Jean Torrance

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Scottish Bird News

Scottish Bird News is the magazine of the SOC. It acts as a channel of communication for SOC members and disseminates information relevant to Scotland's birdlife. It is published four times a year in March, June, September and December. Articles and notices are welcomed and should be sent to the Editors at the address below no later than five weeks before publication. The views expressed are not necessarily the policy of the SOC. Contributors should note that material has to be edited, often at short notice, and it is not practical to let authors see these changes in advance of publication.

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The Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) was established by a group of Scottish ornithologists who met together in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh on 24th March 1936.

The Club now has 2200 members and 14 branches around Scotland. It plays a central role in Scottish birdwatching, bringing together amateur birdwatchers, keen birders and research ornithologists with the aims of documenting, studying and, not least, enjoying Scotland's varied birdlife. Above all, the SOC is a club, relying heavily on keen volunteers and the support of its membership.

Headquarters provide central publications and an annual conference, and houses the Waterston Library, the most comprehensive library of bird literature in Scotland. The network of branches, which meet in Aberdeen, Ayr, the Borders, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, New Galloway, Orkney, St Andrews, Stirling, Stranraer and Thurso, organise field meetings, a winter programme of talks and social events.

The SOC also supports the Local Recorders' Network and the Scottish Birds Records Committee. The latter maintains the 'official' Scottish List on behalf of the Club. The Club supports research and survey work through its Research Grants.

The Club maintains a regularly-updated web site, which not only contains much information about the Club, but is also the key source of information about birds and birdwatching in Scotland. SOC is a registered Scottish charity (no SC 009859).

www.the-soc.org.uk

Passwords to access members' web pages on the SOC web site: 'Little' & 'Tern'